

# Young Adult Literature

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## Finding Common Ground: Multicultural YA Literature

"Why don't we just nuke them?" asked one of my eleventh graders. "Nuke them all. That would solve these problems pretty quick." This student's comments came about a decade ago during a discussion of tensions between the United States and its two Cold War rivals, China and the Soviet Union. He saw no problem in annihilating most of the citizenry of our "enemy" countries. His attitude startled me, but not nearly as much as the quick support he received from his classmates: "Yeah, blow 'em away." "We got the bombs; we might as well use them." "They're all Commies anyway."

I tried to point out that the U.S. did indeed have some serious political differences with China and the Soviet Union, but that was hardly a reason to wipe out millions of men, women, and children. "They're regular human beings with families," I told my students. "People just like you. How could you even think of destroying so many innocent people?"

Unfortunately, I made little headway with my students. From their perspectives, people living on the other side of the world, especially "enemies," were so abstract they hardly seemed real. Because my students knew almost nothing about Soviet or Chinese people, the idea of exterminating all the "Commies" seemed about as horrifying or realistic to them as a Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote cartoon.

Part of their naiveté resulted from the fact that they were typical teenagers: egocentric, unfamiliar with many of the ugly realities of the world, and prone to simplistic notions of right and wrong, good and evil. I knew—or at least I hoped—that most of them would grow out of such narrow-minded thinking in a few years when they gained more knowledge and experience, but as their teacher I wanted them to see themselves as part of

the human family; I wanted them to understand that they had more in common with teenagers in Moscow and Beijing, or even in Detroit and Los Angeles, than they thought they did.

It would have been nice if I could have sent them to a foreign land or into a different culture to spend time with people unlike themselves because I knew that in most cases personal experience with foreigners or strangers would break down their prejudices and broaden their narrow minds. Unfortunately, wholesale student exchanges were out of the question, but by having my eleventh graders read novels about people from other cultures, I could, at least for a while, get them into someone else's skin and help them see the world from a different point of view. Together we began exploring multicultural literature, especially books written for young adults, and we were able to find a small but helpful variety of good books that provided authentic insights into cultures and people we knew little about.

Since then, I've been pleased to see the growth in quality multicultural literature for young adults. Talented writers like Mildred D. Taylor, Walter Dean Myers, and Virginia Hamilton have provided windows into African American culture for

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some time, but only recently has a good supply of young adult novels about other cultures become available. Students who want to read about Asian and Asian American experiences can read any one of the many novels by Laurence Yep and by those who have followed him, including Lensey Namioka, Kyoko Mori, and Marie Lee. For students interested in contemporary Hawaiian culture, Graham Salisbury has written three wonderful novels set on the island of Hawaii. Gary Soto, Sandra Cisneros, Victor Martinez, and other authors have produced some fine novels dealing with Hispanic culture, and readers interested in Native Americans can read novels by Native American authors Joseph Bruchac,

James Welch, and Michael Dorris and by knowledgeable Anglo authors like Tony Hillerman, Will Hobbs, and Helen Hughes Vick.

The authors mentioned above, and many of their colleagues, are terrific writers with many outstanding novels to their credit, and I'm a little reluctant to label their books "multicultural" because labeling good books as anything but literature seems to place them out of the mainstream. For example,

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to some readers and teachers, "Hispanic literature" is somehow different from "real" literature; any label that precedes the word "literature" signals a demotion to a subgenre—books we study for their novelty but that aren't worthy of inclusion in the curricular canon. Young adult literature in general has been exiled to the realms of subliterature, and thus the double-labeled "*multicultural* young adult literature" is doubly damned.

People who label books as "this" or "that" aren't acting out of malice, they're simply trying to help readers find books suitable for them and their interests. Still, it's too bad that labels tend to trigger negative reactions to all literary works that have the misfortune of being anything other than mainstream literature. Good books about people from various ethnic groups are first and foremost *good books*; the fact that they also give young readers some insight into other cultures should only enhance their value. Assuming that I've managed to convince you of that, I will use the troubling label, "multicultural young adult literature" carefully as I try to explain the inherent value of such books to us and to our students.

As our nation becomes ever more diverse, our students need to become more tolerant of other

people and cultures; unfortunately, most teenagers aren't much different from my former eleventh graders, and unless they're provided opportunities, even vicarious ones, to get to know people from various cultures, their narrow-minded notions and prejudices might remain with them into adulthood. Reading quality multicultural young adult books can help adolescent readers find common ground with young people who, on the surface, seem to be very different or almost "alien." Some aspects of adolescence are universal, and because they're universal, they are central to the plots of most young adult stories. Regardless of their culture and heritage, teenagers cannot avoid dealing with the issues and conflicts associated with approaching adulthood, and it is in these coming-of-age stories where students can discover that even though their circumstances may differ, their essential concerns about life do not.

If they can talk about adolescence—and certainly when they read about it—most teenagers will discover that, even though their roads through adolescence take them in different directions, the experiences they encounter along those roads are very similar. For example, all teenagers endure miscellaneous formal and informal rites of passage as they grow up; even though the rites for a Native American teenager may be markedly different from those of an Hispanic teenager, they share the experience of having those rituals. In addition to rites of passage, at one time or another all adolescents wrestle with feelings of alienation and isolation. Although they may deal with those feelings differently, an alienated white teenager feels the same pain and fear as an alienated African American teenager. Similarly, even if their essential parent-child relationships may differ, a white boy in New Jersey and a Korean American girl in Minnesota both must deal with the changing relationship between themselves and their parents and other adults—and also with the tensions that accompany such changes. Regardless of the ethnicity of their authors or characters, young adult novels have at their core these issues and conflicts, and therein lies both the appeal and the opportunity for finding common ground among various cultures.

In fact, multicultural young adult novels are sometimes even more appealing than "mainstream" young adult novels because the conflicts related to adolescence are compounded by tensions that accompany being in the minority of a group. The

search for identity, for example, is even more intense for some teenage characters because not only must they discover *who* they are, but they must also decide *what* they are. If a young adult character is Japanese American, is she more Japanese than American? Or is she both? Or can she be both? Teenage alienation is painful enough, but it can be even more painful for a boy who is the only African American in his senior class. Teenagers often feel marginalized by adult society, but a Native American teenager residing in a predominantly white neighborhood is likely to feel even more marginalized. Because conflict is what interests readers, the compounded conflicts of adolescence at the heart of many multicultural young adult novels make the stories even more engaging than they otherwise would be.

These compelling stories offer satisfying reads for all kinds of teenagers with the additional benefit of helping them discover that, despite who they are, what they are, or where they live, they have much in common with their fellow human beings.

### **Discoveries: Some New or Overlooked YA Books Worth Reading**

*Asylum for Nightface* by Bruce Brooks. A spiritual 14-year-old at peace with his own beliefs but disturbed by his parents' lack of faith eventually has to deal with their conversion to a shallow fundamentalist movement.

*Great Artists* by Robert Cumming. A beautiful, accessible, and informative full-color guide to some of the greatest artists of the Western World.

*Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick. Two young "freaks" team up for friendship, adventure, and survival. This novel was recently made into a feature film, *The Mighty*.

*Hard Ball* by Will Weaver. The third novel about Billy Baggs, a Minnesota farm boy with prodigious baseball talent and some very complicated social and familial relationships.

*The Islander* by Cynthia Rylant. A young boy living on a remote island in the Pacific Northwest is changed forever by a brief encounter with a mermaid.

*Necessary Roughness* by Marie G. Lee. Membership on the football team helps a Korean American boy survive a painful move from Los Angeles to rural Minnesota.

*Stones in Water* by Donna Jo Napoli. A story of the friendship and survival of two Italian boys kidnapped and forced to work in Nazi labor camps in Eastern Europe.

*The Snake Stone* by Berlie Doherty. In this beautifully written, poignant story, a talented diver leaves his home in London to search for his birth mother.

*The True Colors of Caitlynne Jackson* by Carol Lynch Williams. Two sisters, abandoned by their abusive mother for the summer, struggle to survive and to find a safe, loving home.

**1/6-PAGE AD**